

SOVIET EXPERIENCE

# Towards mass education

Lev Bobrov

Towards the end of this century the USSR may be confronted with the task of introducing universal higher education. This is what the sociologists opine there. And this means a whole series of social and economic problems not less serious than those in the switchover to universal secondary education which has now been basically completed in the Soviet Union. Of the 260 million inhabitants of the USSR, 93 million are studying and the figure is rising.

The aim to be achieved is a greater number of graduates with maximum quality and minimum effort. This calls for the perfection of a great deal from the forms and methods of teaching to the organisation of labour. Otherwise not millions but tens of millions of teachers and educators will be required that is, one-third or even a half of the active population (assuming that their working hours and the number of pupils in a class and students in a group will be reduced).

It may be questioned, if universal higher education is necessary at all. In the next few five-year plan periods—no. But let someone look further; into the 21st century. The majority of those working will be directly or indirectly linked with science and the supporting services. All the spheres of labour are being 'scientised.'

This again is a forecast. But how realistic is it? It is based on the actual tendency: the scientific and technological revolution that has been proceeding over the last few decades intellectualises all the spheres of activity. Compare yesterday's unskilled workman and that of today. An illiterate worker could also wield the spade efficiently. But hand-

ing a walking excavator the height of a 20-storeyed building and weighing 10,000 tons is something that only, highly trained operators can manage.

For today's workers it is not enough to have only clever hands. In the USSR fitters for control and measuring instruments spend 80-85 per cent of their shift time on intellectual labour, automatic line adjusters—93-95 per cent and so on.

In the Soviet Union sociological studies indicate that workers as a rule prefer to primitive work an interesting, even if difficult job permitting thinking at the level of an engineer or a technician. Many have been successful in creative quest; they devote even their leisure hours to it. Compare: diplomaed engineers and scientists in that country number about 5 million while the scientific and technological societies of the USSR and the All-Union Society of Inventors and Innovators have more than 17 million members, including workers. Innovation is being encouraged materially and morally. It is also being stimulated by socialist emulation which involves almost 100,000,000 people.

But was it easy to solve them previously? In the pre-Soviet period literacy in the country did not exceed the present Third World level: 27 per cent at average, and only six per cent in the Asian outlying districts. Education bulletin predicted in 1994 that it would take 120 years to make literacy universal in the European part of Russia, 430—in Siberia and the Caucasus and 4,600 years—in Central Asia. That was how the problem was going to be 'solved'. After 1917 in less than the lifetime of a generation (the average longevity in the

USSR is 70 years) both primary and secondary education became universal—respectively in the thirties and the seventies. Now it is higher education's turn.

The rapid growth of the level of education helps to solve them. The cultural revolution in post-1917 USSR accelerated the conversion of the agrarian country into Number Two industrial state. Today the USSR ranks first in the world in the production of oil, coal, iron ore, steel, locomotives, tractors, wheat and cotton.

Nevertheless, difficulties exist. In the past they were far more formidable. And yet they were coped with successfully.

Let us recall: almost 20 out of the 60 years of the Soviet state were spent on the wars imposed on it and the rehabilitation effort. In 1941-1945 alone, repulsing fascist aggression, the Soviet state lost 20 million human lives and 30 per cent of national wealth. Some 72,000 cities, towns and villages and 84,000 educational establishments were destroyed. In the West they thought: reconstruction would take decades. But it took only years.

The consequences of that damage are still being felt. The decline in the birth rate that occurred then repeated itself when the children of that period, having grown up, began to get married: their posterity is as small as their own generation. This 'demographic echo of the war' came in the sixties and it will come in the eighties and in the early 21st century. It aggravates the shortage of labour resources in the USSR, exacerbated by war losses and still not overcome. And what will universal higher education give? The longer a person studies, the later he has children and the number of children is less.

The automation of labour will make up for the shortage

of manpower. And this demands of people an ever higher level of education. The more skilled one's work is, the more productive it becomes.

It is not necessary to have a higher education for this. But desirable. It opens up new growth prospects. In the past, when there was a shortage of educated people, labourers sometimes became foremen, managers and ministers—they studied later. Whereas now executives, for example, in Soviet industry are selected mainly from engineers and technicians.

Not everybody dreams of the position of a manager. Sociological surveys show that in the USSR the majority views a meaningful and interesting job as more important than a career or a wage addition. And doing this job equaling the work of an engineer or, say, an artist may be within one's scope even without a diploma.

But we should not forget the growing social activeness of Soviet people. Workers, collective farmers and employees are in one way or another involved in the administration of their country, and this administration increases in complexity, demanding ever greater professional and general cultural standards. Especially from the deputies of the Soviets, the people's assessors in courts and so on. The more responsible social functions are, the better a person should be trained for them; people must study and study.

USSR at present has almost 40,000 people's universities (against 10,000 in 1964). Their student body totals 10 million—more than the enrolment in the higher and specialised secondary educational establishments of the USSR. This system is being both expanded and perfected. It is paving the way to mass and probably universal higher education in the future.

—APN